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The Importance of Lifelong Learning in Developing Preschool Teachers' Professional Competence

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Abstract

In order for a preschool teacher to develop into a competent individual and continuously strengthen his/her professional identity, it is of great importance to work on all aspects of lifelong professional development. Since the academic year 2009/2010, preschool teachers have had the opportunity to continue their education at university graduate studies in the Republic of Croatia in order to acquire and/or develop their competences, knowledge and skills necessary for the development of professionalism. It is the responsibility of not just the individual, but also the professional community to enable the development of preschool teacher profession in all those areas crucial to the advancement of early childhood and preschool education system. In this sense, formal education enables acquisition of competences needed to create educational policy within the institutions. In order to determine whether preschool teachers consider themselves competent and in which areas, a self-assessment questionnaire of professional competences was developed. The aim of this research is to gain insight into the number of preschool teachers who consider themselves professionally competent for creating educational policy in the institution they work in. Furthermore, this research will examine whether there are differences in self-assessments of professional competences between preschool teachers - graduate students and preschool teachers who completed undergraduate studies, both employed in preschool institutions, and on what dimensions those estimates show correlation.

Key words: *preschool teacher; preschool teacher profession; professional competences; professional identity.*

Introduction

Professional development of a preschool teacher begins with their initial education. In most EU countries, there is an approach which defines preschool teachers' education as an open, dynamic and evolving process, so continuous professional training, even after the completion of the formal part of education, should be a part of educational staff's lifelong learning, with the aim of developing and strengthening professional competences. Šagud (2011) describes professional development of practitioners as an indivisible whole of theoretical, professional and practical knowledge, mutually complementary during formal education and continuous lifelong development and learning. Professional competences are not limited to solely achieving certain knowledge and skills, but can be understood as comprehensive achievements that help preschool teachers successfully deal with challenges of contemporary society and social context in which they live and work. Krstović (2007) states that in that way a preschool teacher is able to critically consider the problems they are faced with and develop accordingly. Senge (2001) describes professional development as continuous purification and deepening of one's own vision, developing patience, objective perception of reality, and directing personal strength. Furthermore, he considers that professional development means exploration of educational practice of each learning community by linking it to questioning, reflecting on and discussing the existing objective reality. According to the aforementioned, it can be said that preschool teachers who strive for and are focused on their own professional development are ready to test their everyday practice, are the driving force of a learning community, and thus strengthen the very institution they work in. In order for the institution to take on the characteristics of a community that develops in accordance with the requirements of modern society, cultural, economic and political context, there should be a systematic support and participation of all key stakeholders. Lifelong learning and inclusion in the professional training that helps an individual develop into a professional ready to respond to all requirements that lie ahead is of extreme importance. It is necessary to emphasize that the culture of a learning community has not developed, nor will it develop, without the effort of all participants, or if preschool teachers engage in vocational training only occasionally, without a direct connection to their own interest area and application of new insights into the teaching practice. It is also important to emphasize the value of reflective processes at the level of the whole institution. Rinaldi (2001) describes self-reflection and reflective processes that occur within the institution among all participants as an opportunity for learning, sharing and creating one's own value systems. Vujičić (2007) also stresses the need for such common processes as she believes that learning and development do not occur to an individual in interaction with practice, but with the overall life environment and people in it. The culture of the institution, its vision and mission also determine the direction in which its participants develop. Mutual support and cooperation are very important, especially if the principal and expert associates nurture common values

and encourage the development of a common value system in a way that enables preschool teachers to develop in the area of their own interests. In order for such forms of professional development to be realized in the aforementioned direction, Peeters and Brandt (2011) emphasize how important it is for the employees to collaborate when closely monitoring children and their needs, and for them to cooperate with parents and the wider and narrower social community. Authors consider all of these as key features of having a clear vision that becomes an inspiration for developing the policy of kindergartens and its participants. Šagud (2011) also describes the model of preschool teachers' professional training through processes of reflexive practice which, as emphasized by the author, is a prerequisite for self-learning and self-advancement in which theoretical knowledge is transmitted into situational and contextual domain. Professional development should involve different forms of training to enable understanding of concrete practice and link theory to certain dimensions of practice. It is exactly this type of learning that is derived from reflexive processes. Slunjski (2008) also speaks in favor of professional refinement through reflexive processes, which yields observable changes in preschool teachers' beliefs and behaviors as active participants. As stated by the author, these cannot be achieved through merely a lecture type of professional training.

Professional Development of Preschool Teachers in the Light of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is the responsibility of every preschool teacher and, as stated by Youngs, Ohsako, and Medel-Anonuevo (2000), it needs to be perceived as a fundamental change in the learning and teaching process. In order to develop a learning community which strives for strengthening all its capacities, great intrinsic motivation of the participants in the educational process is required. Kirkwood and Christie (2006) define preschool teachers' professional development as a process of involving highly motivated and clearly defined goal-oriented individuals. If preschool teachers are not motivated by their own desire to strengthen professional autonomy, there will be little or no effect, or the effect will be reduced to mere short-term adoption of certain knowledge that will not result in the advancement of professional development practice. The environment in which every institution exists, support and openness to self-study, are important for motivation of all stakeholders. Šagud (2011) notes that, without openness to its research component, research practice becomes routinized and automatically accessed, which certainly does not lead to its development. A visible fact in the system of preschool teachers' higher education is that faculties are still focused on the teachers' theoretical development and not the practical part. The number of hours of practical teaching in kindergartens which students are required to attend is insufficient, and the lack of continuous cooperation between these institutions, especially after an individual becomes employed, is also evident. It is believed that such collaboration would be significant for developing a holistic and

interactional learning model that would guarantee professional development from the initial level, in accordance with their interests and capabilities. Such a model of learning would also contribute to development of implicit pedagogy of students who could, by actively participating in the faculty-kindergarten relationship, discuss theoretical knowledge directly in practice and through evaluations with their teachers, preschool teachers and expert associates in kindergartens. In doing so, they would develop their own value system as the basis for further professional development. An example of good practice in developing professional competences of preschool teachers is engaging in action research with the intent of developing a learning community and strengthening the autonomy of all active participants. Developing a practice based on this learning model ensures an active professional community and activity of all participants who will develop a habit of rethinking their steps, in order to continuously strengthen their professional identity. It is important to emphasize that a perceived “developing” community must ensure each participant’s growth and acquisition of competences in “...theoretical, personal, social and practical sense” (Šagud, 2011b, p. 277).

Professional Development through Continuing Formal Education

Contemporary scientific understanding of children’s development has greatly changed the education of preschool teachers, so it is possible to talk about a new paradigm. Vujičić (2012) states that upbringing in early childhood and preschool education requires a competent individual who approaches every child with a high level of professional responsibility. In order to balance theoretical and practical dimensions, a concept of initial education has been developed by applying a competence-based approach in order to achieve quality educational practice, i.e. strengthen preschool teachers’ professional competences. In the academic year 2009/2010, a university graduate study program for early childhood and preschool education under the 3 + 2 model was initiated and the year can rightly be regarded as historic in developing the preschool teacher profession. The objective of the study program is, above all, the development of preschool teacher profession, which implies practitioners who will be able to apply autonomous, critical and reflective thinking, and who will approach the development of their profession creatively and responsibly. After completing the undergraduate level of studies, a student acquires the academic title of university Bachelor of Early childhood and preschool education, and having completed the graduate level, the acquired academic title is Master of Early childhood and preschool education. Based on the generic and general competences obtained, Master of Early childhood and preschool education possesses competences for deeper understanding of institutional education, child and childhood, competences for active participation in complex and demanding processes, competences necessary to conduct research, and competences needed to organize educational process at the institution level, etc. University education is the cornerstone of professional development which should be further strengthened and developed through various forms of lifelong

learning while striving for one's own autonomy and betterment of personal and professional competences. All this constitutes, as pointed out by Krstović (2009), a process of defining and developing indicators which promote the quality of a preschool teacher and his/her education, recognizing preschool teachers as experts and the educational profession and preschool teachers' academic title as equally valuable as other academic titles. When introducing new study programs, according to the European Commission guidelines, the Bologna Reform in the Croatian education system did not clearly define learning outcomes or competences that students acquire after completing this part of the initial education. Therefore, the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka, in cooperation with the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, implemented the Project "*Qualification Standards and Improvement of the Quality of Study Programmes for Preschool and Primary School Teachers*", setting out clear criteria for a set of competences that preschool teachers will have acquired after completing a certain degree level. Since the Master of Early childhood and preschool education is a relatively new profession, it is thus affirmed by work in preschool institutions that exceeds the work in kindergarten groups. It is considered that an individual is competent to actively participate in creating educational policy of the institution, in various management activities and project management. There is an increasing number of preschool teachers who are deciding on this form of professional training, so they enroll in graduate studies and simultaneously continue working in their home institutions. For this reason, this paper sought to find out to what extent preschool teachers consider themselves competent for creating educational policy in the institution in which they work.

Methodology

The aim of this research was to examine to what extent preschool teachers consider themselves professionally competent for creating educational policy of the institution in which they work. Further aim was to ascertain whether there are differences in the self-assessments of professional competences between the preschool teachers employed in preschool institutions and those who simultaneously work and attend graduate studies, and for which dimensions the estimates show correlation.

Based on the aim of the research, the following hypotheses were set:

H1: There is a correlation between preschool teachers' years of work experience and their self-assessment on composite variables. The assumption is that their assessment of competences increases with years of experience.

H2: Preschool teachers who work in kindergartens and are enrolled in graduate studies consider themselves more competent than the ones who have not attended graduate studies.

H3: There is a statistically significant correlation between the age of graduates on all dimensions, i.e. older graduates consider themselves more competent on all dimensions than those of younger age.

Sample

The sample consisted of preschool teachers (N = 306) employed in preschool institutions in the city of Sisak (N = 72) and Zagreb and its suburban areas (N = 234). The sample was made up of two subsamples: the first subsample consisted of employed preschool teachers (N = 213), while the second subsample were employed preschool teachers (N = 93) who were also students enrolled in early childhood and preschool education graduate study program.

Measuring Instrument

For the purposes of the research, a Questionnaire has been constructed, consisting of 22 statements distributed into seven subscales. The respondents expressed their agreement with the statements on a five-point Likert type scale, where 1 meant “I completely disagree” and 5 “I completely agree”. Given the content of the statements, the questionnaire measures seven dimensions: *Professional development* (V1-V3); *Planning, organization and analysis of work* (V4-V6); *Operational jobs related to workplace* (V7-V9); *Commercial business* (V10-V12); *Communication and collaboration* (V13-V15); *Research, development, innovation* (V16-V18) and *Quality assurance* (V19-V22).

Results and Discussion

Basic descriptive values of the subscales are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Basic descriptive values of the subscales

	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis		
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
1. Professional development	1.0	5.0	3.400	.8936	-.167	.141	-.513	.282
2. Planning, organization and analysis of work	1.0	5.0	2.904	1.0921	-.125	.142	-.871	.282
3. Operational jobs related to workplace	1.0	5.0	3.227	1.0349	-.404	.142	-.513	.283
4. Commercial business	1.0	5.0	3.570	.9075	-.697	.145	.469	.289
5. Communication and collaboration	1.0	5.0	3.416	.9176	-.254	.144	-.076	.287
6. Research, development, innovation	1.0	5.0	3.582	.9019	-.452	.143	-.157	.286
7. Quality assurance	1.0	5.0	3.644	.7707	-.751	.143	1.341	.284

As it can be seen in Table 1, the highest assessments were given on the *Quality assurance* dimension ($M=3.64$) which includes: V19 - *I feel competent to apply the elements of the process of evaluation and self-evaluation of institutions of early childhood and preschool education*; V20 - *I have the ability to analyze and evaluate elements of the educational process*; V21 - *I am able to critically evaluate the success of the curriculum of the kindergarten*; V22 - *I have the opportunity to participate in the formation and work of a team for strategic planning of the development of a preschool institution*. These assessments imply that the subjects feel competent when it comes to assessing, evaluating or judging certain segments of the educational process. This indicates that they are involved in reflective processes related to the practice itself at the level of their institutions, which is a good way to develop and strengthen professional competences of preschool teachers as well as their own practice. V22 assessed whether preschool teachers are able to participate in the creation of the strategic plan of the home institution, which is, according to some estimates, an indicator of well-developed cooperative relationships within the institution itself. The lowest degree of agreement was expressed on the *Planning, organization and analysis of work* composite variable ($M = 2.90$) involving V4 - *I actively participate in a team with expert associates and principal of the institution when preparing the annual plan and program and kindergarten and preschool curriculum*; V5 - *I have an opportunity to improve educational practice by conducting reflexive practice in my own institution* and V6 - *I actively participate in the creation of individualized inclusive programs*. These results are not in line with V22 described above, which was assessed with the highest mean value, so it can be concluded that principals and expert associates are included in this form of creating the educational process more, which should not be a practice in institutions that strive to developmental characteristics, but it should also actively involve preschool teachers. Distributions are asymmetric (left skewed), according to the higher values of the arithmetic means. The variables range from slightly platykurtic (V1, V2, V3, V5 and V6) to leptokurtic (V4, V7), according to variability. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested with the internal consistency method according to the Alpha model ($\alpha = 0.89$) which indicates a satisfactory reliability. The reliability of composite variables/subscales is as follows: professional development ($\alpha = 0.697$); planning, organization and analysis of work ($\alpha = 0.812$); operational jobs related to workplace ($\alpha = 0.761$); commercial business ($\alpha = 0.854$); communication and cooperation ($\alpha = 0.654$); research, development, innovation ($\alpha = 0.761$); quality assurance ($\alpha = 0.785$).

H1 hypothesis assumed that there is a correlation between preschool teachers' years of experience and their assessments on composite variables. It was expected that preschool teachers' assessment of competence increases with years (on all composite variables). Distribution of the age variable is as follows: 38.7% up to 10 years, 28.7% 11-20 years, 18% 21-30 years and 14.7% more than 31 years of experience. For testing H1, the parametric coefficient of Pearson correlation was used in the bootstrapped model. Although no polymodal variables were determined, neither kurtosis (except

V7) nor asymmetry were pronounced. Parameters were assessed in the bootstrapped model to reduce the possibility of a Type I error. This is also due to the fact that the coefficient of variability indicates homogeneous characteristics, although V2 variable has $C_v = 38\%$, it is a heterogeneous feature. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Pearson coefficient for correlation with years of service

				Professional development	Planning, organization and analysis of work	Operational jobs related to workplace	Commercial business	Communication and collaboration	Research,development, innovation	Quality assurance	
Years of service	Pearson Correlation			.067	-.009	.085	.256**	.026	-.001	.118	
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.286	.885	.174	.000	.676	.991	.059	
	N			258	258	258	258	258	258	258	
	Bootstrap ^c	Bias		.000	-.002	.000	-.001	.000	.000	.000	-.002
		Std. Error		.065	.065	.065	.058	.070	.068	.065	
		95% Confidence Interval	Lower	-.066	-.140	-.047	.137	-.108	-.137	-.021	
			Upper	.193	.124	.209	.362	.160	.129	.238	

As can be seen in Table 2, preschool teachers with more years of experience are more competent only on *Commercial business* variable ($r = .256$) which includes V10 - *I feel confident to present the work of kindergarten in various public events, professional and scientific gatherings*; V11 - *I feel competent to develop various specialized shorter programs according to the needs of different users* and V12 - *I feel competent to develop business efficiency based on public opinion research*. Since the statements relate to professional competences in relation to users or other stakeholders involved in the work of kindergartens, it can be interpreted that preschool teachers with more years of service already have strong communication skills and professional competences, and feel more competent to engage in such forms of work, compared to their younger colleagues.

H2 hypothesis assumed that preschool teachers who are employed in kindergartens, and are also enrolled in graduate studies, consider themselves more competent in comparison to preschool teachers who have not attended graduate studies. Variable distribution is the following: preschool teachers who are employed and attend graduate studies (30.4%) and preschool teachers who have not attended graduate studies (69.6%). Considering the disproportion of the subsamples being compared, a nonparametric Mann Whitney test was applied. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Mann-Whitney Test Statistics^a

			Professional develop- ment	Planning, organization and analysis of work	Operational jobs related to workplace	Commercial business	Communication and collaboration	Research, develop- ment, innovation	Quality assurance
	Mann-Whitney U		8529.000	8435.000	8023.500	8197.500	8275.000	7359.000	7626.500
	Wilcoxon W		12445.000	12263.000	11851.500	11938.500	29390.000	10845.000	11112.500
	Z		-.993	-.984	-1.542	-.436	-.206	-1.864	-1.623
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.321	.325	.123	.663	.837	.062	.105
Monte Carlo Sig. (2-tailed)		Sig.	.322 ^b	.323 ^b	.124 ^b	.671 ^b	.840 ^b	.062 ^b	.104 ^b
	95% Confidence Interval	Lower Bound	.313	.314	.117	.662	.833	.057	.098
		Upper Bound	.331	.332	.130	.681	.847	.067	.110
Monte Carlo Sig. (1-tailed)		Sig.	.160 ^b	.163 ^b	.062 ^b	.331 ^b	.418 ^b	.031 ^b	.054 ^b
	95% Confidence Interval	Lower Bound	.153	.156	.058	.322	.408	.027	.049
		Upper Bound	.167	.170	.067	.340	.427	.034	.058

a. Grouping Variable: subsamples

b. Based on 10000 sampled tables with starting seed 743671174.

As shown in Table 3, there is no statistically significant difference in the self-assessment of competence between preschool teachers studying at the graduate study of early childhood and preschool education and the ones who work but are not studying, given the estimation of composite variables. H2 is therefore rejected.

H3 hypothesis assumed that there is a statistically significant age-related relationship of preschool teachers with their self-assessment of competence on all composite variables. Distribution of the age variable in the subsamples is as follows: less than 30 years (23.7%), 31-40 years (29.3%), 41-50 (24%), 51-60 (21.7%) and 61 and more years of age (1.3%). For testing H3, the parametric coefficient of Pearson correlation was used in the bootstrapped model. The results are shown in Table 4.

As shown in Table 4, there is a statistically significant age-related correlation between the self-assessment of competence of respondents and *Commercial business* composite variable ($r = .229$), which suggests that older preschool teachers consider themselves more competent than their younger colleagues. As in H1, preschool teachers with more years of experience see themselves more competent on the same composite variable (described in Table 2), so this result was expected. The hypothesis is therefore partly confirmed. From these results, and in line with commitment and responsibility of preschool teachers to participate in various forms of lifelong learning, the conclusion

is that respondents possess professional awareness, although it was expected that they would express a higher level of agreement in all dimensions.

Table 4
Pearson coefficient of correlation with age

			Professional development	Planning, organization and analysis of work	Operational jobs related to workplace	Commercial business	Communication and collaboration	Research, development, innovation	Quality assurance
Age	Bootstrap ^c	Pearson Correlation	.093	-.001	.106	.229**	.033	.017	.153*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.136	.987	.089	.000	.603	.784	.014
		N	258	258	258	258	258	258	258
		Bias	-.001	.001	.002	-.001	.003	.000	.000
		Std. Error	.064	.060	.066	.058	.069	.066	.062
		95% Confidence Interval							
		Lower	-.032	-.124	-.024	.112	-.103	-.108	.025
		Upper	.214	.118	.231	.345	.174	.146	.269

Conclusion

Professional development of educational staff is a duty and responsibility which should be carried out on a continuous basis, though not in a way that engages preschool teachers in professional training which is not in line with their interests, but such a training that presents a process driven by their intrinsic motivation. The purpose of this paper was to examine whether self-assessment of competences was higher, and on which dimensions, for those preschool teachers attending graduate studies than of those who are not attending early childhood and preschool education graduate studies. Starting from the fact that the very motivation is at a higher level as soon as they decide to continue their studies, it was expected that those teachers also feel more competent. Since there are numerous examples suggesting that highly-motivated preschool teachers engage in action research processes, such an assumption was not negligible in this case either. Furthermore, the questionnaire was designed to examine preschool teachers' competences based on learning outcomes of the graduate study of early childhood and preschool education, which implies that even non-graduate preschool teachers gained these competences through some form of professional training. As a practitioner herself, and a part of the educational system, currently in the role of principal, over the last few years the author has witnessed an increased motivation of educators to continue with their own professional development, especially in gaining or strengthening certain competences (e.g. working with children with developmental difficulties, inclusion in different training programs which offer

certificates as proof of acquired competences needed to perform certain programs, etc.). All this points to strengthening awareness of the educational profession and the importance of lifelong learning with a view of developing professional, personal and practical competences. Because the study requires certain sacrifice, financial resources and high intrinsic motivation, there is still a relatively small number of preschool teachers who decide on such a model of professional development. Despite this, it can be said that professional awareness of the participants in this research has reached a level of sufficient quality, the one where they strive for development and tend to increase motivation for continuing their formal education as well as attending various informal types of practical training. Professional development of an individual certainly reflects on his/her entire environment. The task of the principal and expert associates is to encourage inclusion in those forms of vocational training that will strengthen the interests of preschool teachers and thus raise the quality of their institution. A disadvantage of this research is the apparent disproportion of compared subsamples. For the aforementioned reasons, still only a few preschool teachers decide to continue their studies, and since the graduate study program was formed only a few years ago, and those who decided to continue their studies on a graduate level are still in the study system, future research might give more concrete results and guidelines. Lifelong learning certainly needs to be given a lot of attention and support in order to establish continuous professional growth and development for both preschool teachers and the whole institution. Only the component of development leads to dimension of quality that our youngest primary users need and are worthy of and therefore children are the main reason we should strive for such progress.

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Značaj cjeloživotnog usavršavanja za razvoj profesionalnih kompetencija odgojitelja

Sažetak

Kako bi se odgojitelj razvijao u kompetentnog pojedinca te kontinuirano osnaživao svoj profesionalni identitet, od velike je važnosti rad na sebi putem svih oblika cjeloživotnog stručnog usavršavanja. Od akademske godine 2009./2010. u Republici Hrvatskoj odgojitelji imaju mogućnost nastaviti svoje obrazovanje na sveučilišnom diplomskom studiju kako bi stekli i/ili razvili svoje kompetencije, znanja i vještine koji su potrebni za razvoj profesionalizma. Odgovornost, ne samo pojedinca već i profesionalne zajednice, jest omogućiti razvoj odgojiteljske profesije u svim onim dijelovima ključnim za napredovanje ranog i predškolskog odgojno-obrazovnog sustava. Formalno obrazovanje, u tom smislu, omogućuje stjecanje kompetencija potrebnih za kreiranje obrazovne politike unutar vlastitih ustanova. Kako bi se procijenilo smatraju li se i u kojim se područjima odgojitelji kompetentnima, konstruiran je upitnik za samoprocjenu profesionalnih kompetencija. Cilj je ovog istraživanja dobiti uvid u to koliko se odgojitelji smatraju profesionalno kompetentnima za kreiranje obrazovne politike ustanove u kojoj rade. Nadalje, ispitat će se postoje li razlike u samoprocjenama profesionalnih kompetencija odgojitelja – polaznika diplomskih studija koji su u radnom odnosu u predškolskim ustanovama i odgojitelja sa završenim stručnim ili preddiplomskim studijem također u radnom odnosu, te na kojim dimenzijama postoji povezanost njihove procjene.

Ključne riječi: *odgojitelji; odgojiteljska profesija; profesionalni identitet; profesionalne kompetencije.*